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Beyond the Fence: Cultural Displacement and Social Change in Bangladesh's Borderlands

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Abstract

The border is not merely a line but a space of contact, transition, and often, transformation. The culture of the borderland or the border region of Chapainawabganj, India-Bangladesh borderland, is quickly changing due to the influence of external forces. The study seeks to analyze the impact of the infiltration of foreign culture, facilitated by the use of satellite TV, the internet and social media, to transform the traditional lifestyles, value system, and social contacts of inhabitants in such villages. Whereas globalization is the means to the access to new ideas and other means of expression, it is also a threat to the indigenous culture, especially in the communities located on the borders where state presence is usually lower and the cultural diffusion is more intense. This paper correlates the cultural degradation explaining its effects, in terms of family bond, youth behavior, community identity and overall social fabric, by retrieving qualitative data collected from border villages in Chapainawabganj. The results are focused on the timeliness of cultural resilience against the unfiltered exposure media and transnational influence, as well as initiate the discussion on policy, education, and empowerment of the community in the borderland. By focusing on the lived experiences of those at the geographical and cultural margins of Bangladesh, this study contributes to broader discussions on national identity, cultural sovereignty, and the unintended consequences of technological advancement.

Keywords

Cultural Infiltration, Borderlands, Homi Bhabha, Chapainawabganj.

1. Introduction

Borderlands are not merely geopolitical frontiers, besides it's a complex social and cultural spaces where competing forces of identity, power, and culture intersect (Martinez, 1994; Wilson & Donnan, 2012). Migration, security, and trade have long been associated with the India-Bangladesh border. The cultural dimensions of borderland life still remain underexplored. Chapainawabganj, a northwestern bordered district of Bangladesh, exemplifies this reality. The daily lives of people here are influenced by Indian cultural practices which are transmitted through media, markets, and informal exchanges. Weddings, clothing styles, language use, and entertainment preferences increasingly mirror Indian cultural expressions.

This phenomenon raises pressing questions: How do borderland residents negotiate cultural infiltration? To what extent do they internalize or resist dominant cultural forms? And what identities emerge in such contested spaces?

Some deny Indian influence but everyday practices suggest otherwise. Complexities of cultural negotiation are reflected in this paradox. Political hostility toward India and cultural admiration coexist together in this paradox.

Existing scholarship focuses on media's acts as a carrier of cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971; Thussu, 2007) and how the identity fluidity is fostered by globalization (Hall, 1996). Yet, borderlands present a distinct case, which Bhabha (1994) calls a "Third Space". The "Third Space" is a site of negotiation where hybrid identities are produced. This paper argues that cultural infiltration in Chapainawabganj is not merely one-way domination but a hybridizing process that unsettles fixed identities while embedding hegemonic values.

Thus, the research problem addressed here is the underexplored dynamics of cultural change in Bangladesh's borderlands, where Indian influence simultaneously reshapes local traditions and creates contested hybrid identities. The rationale for this study lies in filling the gap in borderland literature by focusing on cultural displacement rather than solely on security or migration concerns.

2. Literature Review

Culture is a highly contested yet vibrant concept, which is comprised of mutual meanings, practices, and values and mauled through language, media, rituals and general day to day interactions. Culture does not exist in a fixed or homogenous form but it changes with interaction with power, identity and globalization (Hall, 1996). According to Geertz (1973), culture is a web of significant meaning that is through which human beings explain their world, whereas Storey (2019) asserted that culture generates and reproduces meaning in a particular social setting. This cultural negotiation is more complicated in the borderland space, where communities are exposed to the competing cultural messages and the hegemonic forces.

In the era of globalization, the media have become an important tool of culture propagation. According to Appadurai (1996), every movement of images and narratives all over the world have the capacity to define the dreams and visions of any person, particularly, people along the fringe regions of nation-states. Rajagopal (2001) and Thussu (2007) illustrate how the Indian media especially Bollywood, crosses and has transformed the cultural boundaries of India to reach out to other countries in the South Asian continent. Similarly, Saad and Huda (2024) investigate how foreign media shape the cultural perceptions and behaviors of Bangladeshi youths. Their research reveals that exposure to foreign television and digital content encourages admiration for imported lifestyles and reshapes identity formation. Yet, the authors argue that audiences are not merely passive recipients but active agents capable of critical resistance to cultural imperialism. This aligns with the broader notion that media operates as a powerful instrument of transnational cultural flow, producing both imitation and contestation within local contexts. According to Kraidy (2005) the hybridity created by this media leads to establishment of new cultural identity, however, by doing so, it threatens to jeopardize the old practices and values.

The notion of cultural hybridity presented by Bhabha (1994) is especially helpful in explaining how cultural contact zones generate new hybrid forms of identity. Bhabha emphasizes that cultural interaction produces a Third Space, where meanings are negotiated, and identities are redefined. Cultural products of Indian cultural identity that transcend into the borders generate the practice of hybridity, including weddings, language, and fashion, in which the influences of Bangladeshi and Indian traditions interact.

The study of cultural infiltration in borderland regions remains a relatively underexplored field despite the relevance of these theoretical frameworks. Even though these theoretical frames are quite relevant, the theme of cultural infiltration to borderland areas is still relatively a poorly researched aspect. Security, migration, and trade have been the main priorities of most studying borders (Wilson & Donnan, 2012) whereas there has not been much academic concern over the subtle yet incredible invasion of the outsider culture. The article makes good on this gap by attempting to uniquely revolve around how the Indian culture permeates and re-structures the daily lives and identity of individuals living in the Chapainawabganj borderland.

This study takes the theory of Bhabha with the empirical evidence that has been gathered through fieldwork to have a deeper understanding of cultural change in borderlands. It underlines that cultural infiltration is not just an incident of geographical vicinity or financial interdependence but rather an addition of hybridizing tactics enacted by the means of media, rituals and generational desires.

3. Theoretical Framework: Bhabha's Hybridity and Third Space

Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the Third Space is the central framework for this study. Bhabha (1994) argues that cultures do not remain pure or separate when they come in contact with each other but instead, they become mixed and hybrid. This hybridity destabilizes the fixed notions of identity and results in cultural practices not being purely one or the other.

The Third Space is the cultural zone where this negotiation takes place. It is an ambivalent and creative space in which resistance and assimilation coexist. Weddings, clothing fashions, and language infused with Hindi slang in borderlands such as Chapainawabganj, are examples of hybrid forms produced in this Third Space. In this case, the influence of the Indian culture is not merely dictated but is redefined and refined in the form of local practices.

This framework can be especially useful in interpreting the paradox which can be seen in Chapainawabganj: the people deny Indian influence but, in their daily life, their practice reflects it.

Bhabha's theory shows that the cultural infiltration is not a unidirectional dominance but a multifaceted negotiation resulting in the emergence of hybrid identities and contested values. It highlights the in-between cultural existence of the communities in the borderland; simultaneously adopting, resisting, and transforming the influences that cross the border.

2. Methodology

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation in three villages of two unions under Shibganj sub-district of Chapainawabganj district near the India-Bangladesh border. These villages were selected for their proximity to the border. Participants included youth, parents, teachers, and community elders. Fieldwork lasted three months, with 23 interviews and 2 Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) with 7 participants each transcribed.

It was observed during the festivals, marriages, and local meetups. Consumption of media was recorded and inventory of television content at home was recorded. Grounded theory principles were therefore applied by performing thematic analysis, where key themes of denial of influence, media penetration, generational differences and cultural hybridization emerged naturally (Charmaz, 2006).

Ethical issues were upheld in achieving an informed consent and anonymity. The strategy assisted in generating subtle knowledge of the perception and enactment of cultural identity issues among people.

3. Findings and Analysis

3.1. Infiltration without Acknowledgment

Interviewees often denied any influence of Indian culture in their daily lives. Yet their wedding rituals, dress codes, and musical choices closely mirrored Indian customs. Indian bridal lehengas, Bollywood-inspired choreography, and the frequent use of Hindi phrases demonstrated cultural penetration. This contradiction reflects Bhabha's idea of hybridity, where the coexistence of denial and adoption illustrates the creation of a Third Space (Bhabha, 1994). Residents unknowingly negotiate cultural identities, neither fully rejecting nor fully embracing Indian culture, but instead producing a hybridized identity.

3.2. Media as a Tool of Cultural Penetration

Indian satellite television and YouTube content are widely accessible in households. Youth referred to Bollywood actors and Indian dramas more often than local cultural icons. The popularity of such media shows how the Third Space operates as a site where cultural symbols are contested, adapted, and internalized (Appadurai, 1996; Rajagopal, 2001). Indian media not only entertains but constructs aspirational lifestyles, which borderland youth attempt to imitate. The

hybridity here is evident: speech patterns, fashion, and behaviors merge Indian cultural cues with local Bangladeshi traditions (Thussu, 2007).

However, a subtle media counter-flow was observed. Many families, particularly the older generation, continue to engage with Bangladeshi news channels, Islamic programs, and local sports broadcasts—especially cricket matches featuring the national team. These practices reinforce a sense of national belonging and serve as cultural anchors. Which counters the dominance of Indian entertainment media? This coexistence of flows demonstrates that cultural imperialism is not absolute but negotiated through selective consumption.

3.3. Cultural Consumption amid Political Dislike

Although Indian culture is widely consumed, political sentiments toward India are often negative. Border residents expressed discontent over BSF harassment and cross-border trade issues. This paradox highlights the ambivalence of the Third Space, where admiration of the cultural products is accompanied by political resistance (Said, 1978). Inhabitants are more or less embodied with a schizophrenic sense of consciousness: they criticize the political state and at the same time adopt cultural imports that influence their everyday practices.

3.4. Changing Family Dynamics and Youth Behavior

A widening generation gap was witnessed as parents complained of declining respect, shifting dress codes and the lack of religious adherence among the youths. These changes were attributed to many people blaming the Indian media (Bauman, 2000; Tomlinson, 1999). At the same time, the young people admired the cosmopolitan lives portrayed in the Indian films. This demonstrates the destabilizing effect of hybridity: the traditional authority is put in question as young people occupy a cultural in-between zone, redefining identities in the Third Space (Bhabha, 1994). Familial tensions therefore represent deeper cultural negotiations. The elders often described these transformations as signs of "cultural degradation." For them, degradation meant the visible decline of modesty and moral discipline — "Our daughters wear clothes like the actresses," one respondent noted, "and the boys speak half in Hindi and laugh when we tell them to stop." Such remarks indicate that degradation, from their perspective, signifies not just behavioral change but the erosion of respect, ritual sincerity, and linguistic purity that once defined community life.

3.5. Hybridization and Cultural Confusion

Chapainawabganj's cultural identity is increasingly hybrid. Weddings combine Bangladeshi rituals with Indian attire and music. Everyday language includes Hindi slang, and devotional songs at religious festivals borrow from Indian traditions. Many youths struggled to distinguish the origins of their practices. This kind of cultural blending is an example of Bhabha's notion hybridity, in which cultural boundaries are obliterated and new hybrid identities are created (Bhabha, 1994; Nederveen Pieterse, 2004). Such confusion is an indication of creativity as well as vulnerability: on the one hand, it enables exploration, but on the other, it may destroy the premises of local culture.

4. Discussion

The findings demonstrate how concepts of hybridity and the Third Space by Bhabha can provide critical insight into cultural transformation in the borderlands of Chapainawabganj. Instead of a mere story of domination, the role of the Indian culture in the borderlands is evident in negotiation and ambivalence. People are resistant and practicing both cultures that create hybridity which disrupts the sense of the Bangladeshi identity (Hall, 1996; Bhabha, 1994).

The Third Space is dominant in various domains: the use of Indian and Bangladeshi traditions in weddings, the use of Hindi slang by youth but still feeling a sense of pride about Bangladeshi heritage and these communities watching Indian entertainment while politically resenting the Indian state. Such a state of ambivalence demonstrates the fact that cultural intrusion is not an instant absorption but rather a process of re-signification (Kraidy, 2005).

Media plays a particularly powerful role in sustaining the Third Space. The Indian content has dominated with minimal local competition and it forms aspirational lifestyles among the young people (Appadurai, 1996; Thussu, 2007). This reconstitutes the cultural values, making hybridity the norm rather than the exception. But such a hybridization pro-

cess comes at a cost: it undermines indigenous cultural authority and creates confusion in identity (Nederveen Pieterse, 2004).

Finally, cultural sovereignty is questioned in Chapainawabganj because of hybridity. With blurred traditional practices, societies stand to lose their ability of defining themselves according to their own words. However, hybridity also shows strength and flexibility and it shows how people in the borderlands are able to negotiate through cultural pressures creatively (Bhabha, 1994). It is important to recognize this duality in order to come up with strategies that would maintain cultural sovereignty without ignoring the fact that cultural interaction was inevitable in the life of the borderland.

5. Recommendations

5.1. Promote Local Cultural Institutions

Cultural centers and folk museums should be established by government and NGOs in an attempt to conserve indigenous practices. These institutions could also document and showcase the hybrid cultural forms emerging in border areas, highlighting how local communities negotiate influences from both sides.

5.2. Invest in Local Media

Focus on content that highlights hybrid identities and daily life in border regions, showing how local communities blend indigenous and external cultural elements. This allows the community to critically reflect on their own cultural negotiation and strengthens recognition of the Third Space.

5.3. Curriculum Reform

The focus of school curricula should be local history, oral traditions and local heroes. The focus of school curricula should be local history, oral traditions, and local heroes. Incorporate studies on borderland cultural hybridity, showing students how identities are negotiated and created in spaces of cultural overlap.

5.4. Cross-Border Cultural Policy

India and Bangladesh need to look into regulated cultural exchange programs as an alternative to uncontrolled flow which will bring about mutual respect. Suggest structured student and artist exchange programs focused on shared heritage, traditional crafts, and local performing arts, rather than just contemporary Bollywood/media. This would encourage appreciation of both cultures while reinforcing local hybrid identities.

5.5. Community Awareness Programs

Workshops, festivals, and public discussions can engage youth in critically reflecting on their identity. Include sessions that explicitly discuss hybridity and Third Space concepts, helping youth recognize and celebrate the dynamic interplay of local and external cultural influences.

5. Conclusion

Borderland communities like those in Chapainawabganj navigate a fragile cultural landscape where Indian cultural influence is deeply embedded yet consciously denied. Using Bhabha's theory of hybridity and the Third Space**,** this paper has shown how cultural infiltration reshapes identity through everyday practices, media consumption, and generational shifts. Hybridity explains the coexistence of denial and adoption, revealing how borderland residents inhabit an in-between space that is both resistant and receptive to external cultural flows.

The Third Space perspective highlights that cultural change in Chapainawabganj is not simply a matter of domination but a process of negotiation that produces hybrid identities. While these hybrid forms reflect adaptability and creativity, they also risk long-term cultural displacement if left unchecked. Protecting cultural sovereignty in borderlands

therefore requires empowering communities with education, localized media, and platforms for indigenous expression. Only then can the "fence" serve its dual function; not just of separation, but of preservation.

Declarations

Author Contributions

Atia Ibnat Rifah and Azizul Hakim Rakib have equally contributed to the conceptualization, design, and execution of the research. Both authors were involved in literature review, fieldwork, data analysis, and drafting of the manuscript. As Rakib was mainly involved in organizing the qualitative data as well as in thematically processing them, Rifah laid main emphasis on conceptualizing theories and contextualizing them. Final editing and approval were done collaboratively.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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